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# CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 11 Feb. 1981

## THE PROBLEM OF DEATH

Talk given by Shih-fu Sheng-Yen on June 29, 1980, during Ch'an retreat.

In the past the greatest problem that Ch'an masters encountered with their disciples was getting them to have an earnest attitude toward the fact of death. Without a deep sensitivity to the problem of death, it's very hard to get into the practice of Ch'an. It is very difficult for people who are young, or who live in a very "safe" or sheltered environment, to get a feel for death. I don't know whether any of you ever think about this business of death, and possibly, even if you do, you don't feel it is all that serious and that it really doesn't concern you right now. I wonder how sensitive you are to the fact that you are going to die, that life is impermanent.

Probably most young people can't really bring themselves to be moved by the fact of death. Of the people who are moved by the fact of death, there are two kinds of attitudes. Most commonly it is a kind of fear of death, that is, they don't know how soon they are going to die, and they don't want to die. They may want to hold on to the good things in this life or possibly something they can leave behind which they will be admired for in the future. There is a great deal of self-attachment in this attitude.

The other type of attitude is held by people who are practicing. When they are practicing well, the fear of death is absent. They are consciously aware that they are going to die and death may come at any time, and they don't want to die leaving anything undone. This means they want to take advantage of all their time to practice hard. Since they still have not attained liberation, they don't know where they're going after death. But they know they are in contact with the Buddha Dharma now, so they should make good use of the present life to practice as much as they can. Of course, there is self-attachment involved here also. But this is necessary. If there were no self-attachment, you would not have the original thought to practice. It was



in order to solve your own problems that you first began practicing.

The most important point that the Great Masters in the past have made with regard to death is: when you are actually practicing, you should not be afraid of your body dying, or of losing something. In the past, when people left the home life, they made a kind of mental preparation that they were handing their body over to the monastery, and handing their life over to the spiritual beings who protect the Buddha Dharma. Whatever the monastery or Dharma protectors instruct them to do, they will do. They are just going to practice, disregarding their body and life.

As to the practitioner who does not think about death or care about it one way or another because it doesn't affect him anyway, and thus is not afraid of death - this is also a good attitude. One can practice well with it. People who are constantly worrying about their body during meditation - I feel a little pain here, a little discomfort there, if I keep on going, maybe something will happen to me - will never be able to practice well. Not only should you not worry about your body dying, but you should not worry about your spirit dying. If there's any kind of "spirit" left that could become a Buddha, then it's definitely not the real thing. It's just a demon or a ghost! If there is anything left there, no matter if it is a "false" or "wandering" mind, or a so-called "true" or "correct" mind, it has to die, or else it's just a ghost. So what do you want to do - become a Buddha or a ghost?

Once in China there was a monk who practiced so well he was able to leave his body and travel around. One time he left his body for a week and everyone took a look at him for that one week sitting there and assumed he had died, so they cremated his body. At the end of the week, he came back to the same place and couldn't find his body. So he hovered up in the sky, yelling out, "Where am I? Where am I?" Everybody in the monastery was frightened about this because for several days straight he was shouting "Where am I?" And now, some of you are also using this method, right? Did any of you find it?

Anyway, as it happened, after he was shouting for a few days, the abbot decided to get rid of him in a certain way. He put a big tub of water right under where the sound was coming from, and the next time they heard the voice crying, "Where am I?", the abbot yelled up, "You're down here!" Upon hearing that, the spirit descended with a splash. Then the abbot called out to him, "You're already dead! After all, all you did was turn yourself into a ghost. Pitiably ghost! Did you really get liberated? Don't you know that neither the five skandhas nor the four elements that compose the body are you? Where are you?"

Then this monk realized that his physical body was not the same as himself, and the death of the physical body was not an important issue. If he was still to think that the water was actually himself, he would have transformed from a ghost to a water spirit.

So if I put this glass of water here right now, and if someone were to ask, "Where am I?" and I were to say, "You are here" (pointing to the water), would any of you get enlightened?



## NEWS ITEMS

Shih-fu Sheng-Yen left for Taiwan on Jan. 20. During his stay there, he will hold 3 intensive Ch'an retreats, conduct the winter relief program for the poor at the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture in Taiwan, lecture on the Sutras, and teach at the Univ. of Chinese Culture, where he heads the Institute of Buddhist Studies. Shih-fu will return to New York on April 19.

On Sunday, Feb. 8, the Ch'an Center invited all members and friends to celebrate the Chinese New Year together. In the morning we chanted the Diamond Sutra, followed by a food offering ceremony. After a special lunch of Chinese vegetarian dishes traditionally served on the New Year, we had an afternoon session of chanting the Great Compassion Dharani, the Heart Sutra, and reciting the name of Sakyamuni Buddha.

There are 3 weekend meditation retreats planned for the next 3 months, on the following dates: Feb. 13 (eve) to Feb. 15 (eve), Mar. 13 (eve) to Mar. 15 (eve), and Apr. 10 (eve) to Apr. 12 (eve).

A brief summary of Ch'an Center activities during Shih-fu's absence is as follows:  
Sunday Meetings: Sunday is an open day for all visitors. Schedule:  
9:00 - 11:30. Free Meditation. 12:00. Vegetarian Lunch (\$1 contribution).  
1:30. Group Discussion. 2:30. Meditation and/or work. 5:30. Evening Service.

Beginners Class in Meditation: When Shih-fu was last in New York he trained several senior students who are now qualified to teach the beginners class. Please inform any of your friends who may be interested in learning meditation. Classes may be arranged at any time during weekday evenings or on weekends.

4-Week Course on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra: Dan Stevenson, graduate student in Buddhist Studies at Columbia Univ. and teacher at Hunter College, will offer a series of four classes on the Heart Sutra, which is the essence of the Mahayana teaching of Emptiness and covers the basic concepts of Buddhism. These will be held on Sunday mornings at 10:00, starting on March 8. Dan will use a unique approach by examining the meaning of the Chinese characters one by one so that people with no previous knowledge of Chinese will be able to study the sutra in the original Chinese. Call for further information.

On Sunday afternoon, March 22, at 1:30 PM, Ch'an Center member Irene Liu, who teaches Chinese at Columbia Univ., will present a slide show of her recent visit to mainland China, including several Buddhist temples.

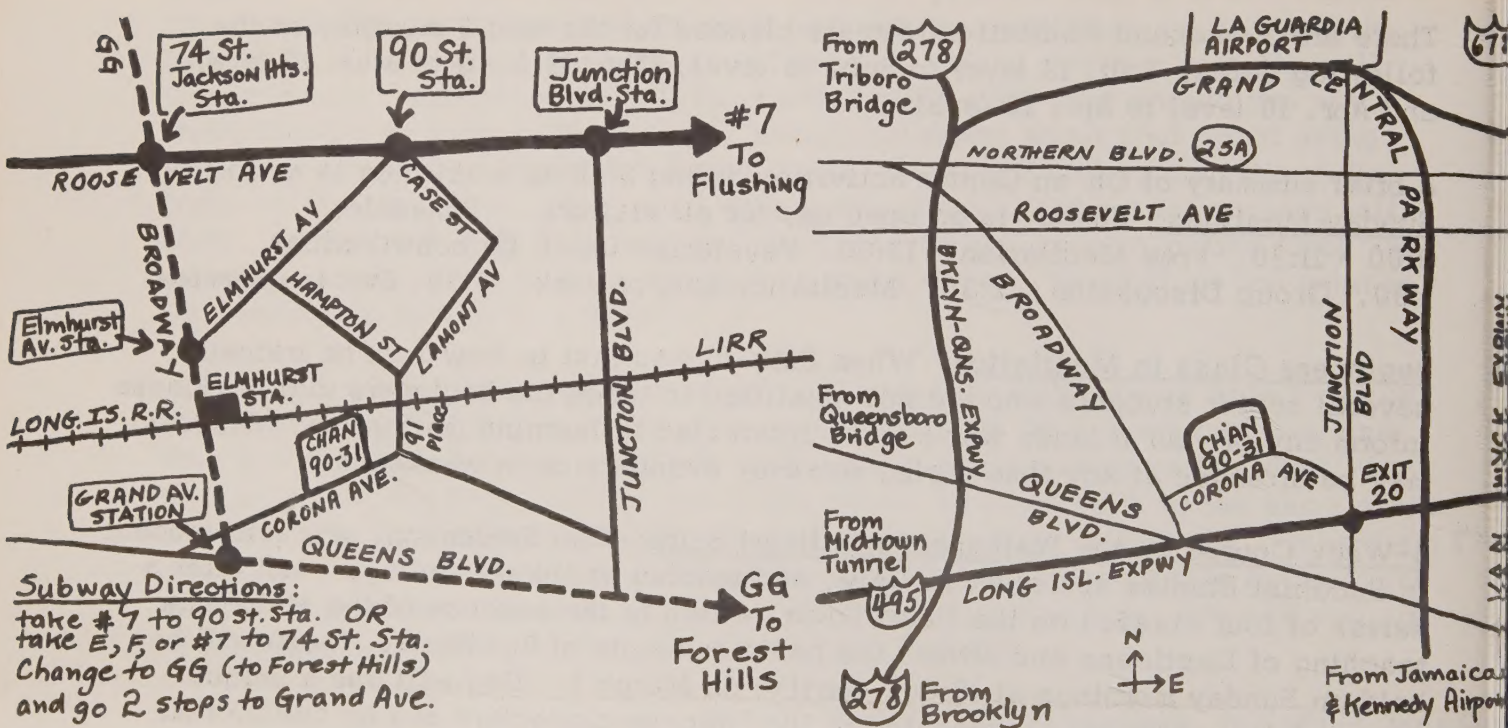
For further information on Ch'an Center activities, call (212) 592-6593, or write:

Ch'an Center  
Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture  
90-31 Corona Avenue  
Elmhurst, New York 11373



The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.



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